

Kant and McDowell on Skepticism and Disjunctivism

I

The Fourth Paralogism of the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* aims to repudiate, in Kant's terms, skeptical idealism that doubts the existence of outer objects.¹ But it is widely regarded as an unavailing attempt to refute skepticism or even as, ironically, Kant's implicit commitment to phenomenalism.² With the development of the non-phenomenalist reading of Kant's transcendental idealism, however, there is a tendency to deem the Fourth Paralogism more positive.³ Recently, Luigi Caranti develops a detailed historical and philosophical account along this line:

In 1770, Kant had failed to refute skepticism by identifying phenomena with mental entities, and by affirming things in themselves as the mind-independent objects that caused them (the strategy of the *Dissertation*); realizing this, he was forced to modify radically his notion of phenomena in such a way as to make a new antiskeptical argument possible. This new notion was precisely the idea that the immediate objects of our external experience (outer phenomena or appearances) are not mental entities, but rather genuine, mind-independent objects. This idea, which he introduced over the course of the silent decade, constituted his first step towards the antiskeptical argument of the First Edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the Fourth Paralogism. [. . .] Far from being a deeply flawed effort to refute Cartesian skepticism by affirming some version of Berkeley's *esse est percipi*, the Fourth Paralogism is in fact an expression of the empirical form of realism that characterizes the final stage of Kant's development. Once we have abandoned the phenomenalist reading, we can begin to see that the Fourth Paralogism contains material for a powerful refutation of skepticism.⁴

Caranti not only suggests that we should take the non-phenomenalist reading of transcendental idealism, but holds that the phenomenalist reading inevitably makes

¹ KrV, AA: A377.1f.

² For a paradigmatic interpretation that the Fourth Paralogism of the first edition reveals Kant's commitment to phenomenalism, see Guyer, Paul: *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*. Cambridge. 1987, 280-82. For a more sympathetic interpretation that still doubts that the difference between Kant and Berkeley is considerable, see Beiser, Frederick C.: *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781-1801*. Cambridge. 2002, 88-103.

³ For a standard non-phenomenalist account of Kant's philosophy in general, see Allison, Henry E.: *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense*. New Haven. 2004, 3-42. For a non-phenomenalist account of the Fourth Paralogism in particular, see Bird, Graham: *The Revolutionary Kant: A Commentary on the Critique of Pure Reason*. Chicago. 2006, 639-42.

⁴ Caranti, Luigi: *Kant and the Scandal of Philosophy: The Kantian Critique of Cartesian Skepticism*. Toronto. 2008, 4f.

Kant's empirical realism doomed to failure. This line of thought echoes contemporary disjunctivism, which also refuses the view that our experience is confined solely to the mental realm that could be unaffected by external world and regards this view as the source of the skeptical predicament of our knowledge about external world.⁵ This parallel, I think, is not superficial. Unlike Caranti who holds that the anti-skeptical argument of the Fourth Paralogism presupposes the non-phenomenalist reading and takes that reading as the consequence of the Transcendental Aesthetic,⁶ an issue that remains controversial whether textual evidence alone can determine the correctness of the non-phenomenalist reading, I will show that the Fourth Paralogism offers us a viable argument to dismiss skepticism so as to preserve the disjunctive conception of experience. Before that, I will discuss the debates between John McDowell, a major proponent of disjunctivism, and his critic, Crispin Wright, to bring out more parallels between Kant and disjunctivism and, moreover, to show that Kant presents a more satisfactory argument for disjunctivism.

II

In recent debates between McDowell and Wright on the anti-skeptic force of disjunctivism, their disagreement lies in the nature and the epistemic role of experience. Skepticism begins with the fact that our experience is fallible and then concludes that perception can be subjectively indistinguishable from hallucinatory appearances. Therefore, our experience of external world can not only go wrong in particular cases but also becomes problematic in general. The skeptic's scenario is so haunting, McDowell diagnoses, because it leads us to the *highest common factor conception* of experience that in enjoying perceptions we are in the same subjective position as in suffering hallucinations. In whichever cases, experiences in themselves are the same.

⁵ For a discussion of contemporary disjunctivism, see Haddock, Adrian and Fiona Macpherson: "Introduction: Varieties of Disjunctivism". In: *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge*. Oxford, 2008, 1-24.

⁶ Caranti: *Kant and the Scandal of Philosophy*, 48-79.

The only difference among these types of experience, perceptual, illusory, hallucinatory, dreamy, is the way they originate, a feature that is *extrinsic* to the experience itself so as to be subjectively indistinguishable.

Instead, McDowell proposes the *disjunctive conception* of experience: “whereas in one kind of case what is given to experience is a mere appearance, in the other it is the fact itself made manifest.”⁷ Accordingly, the difference among these types of experience is *intrinsic* to themselves. Although we sometimes mistake a hallucination with a perception, this mistake does not force us to take them as intrinsically the same. In the cases of perception, our cognitive faculties still *directly* engage in the physical world, and a hallucination fails to do so. Disjunctivism, McDowell argues, provides us an alternative to ignore skepticism as a genuine challenge to the commonsensical view that the world manifests itself to us in perception, so long as we realize that the fallibility of experience does not entail the highest common factor conception.⁸

Wright rejects that replacing the highest common factor conception with the disjunctive conception can get out of the skeptic’s scenario. Insisting that our faculties directly engage in the world cannot secure the epistemic role of perception, namely, that perception can render its warrant for our knowledge of external world indefeasible. Modifying Moore’s famous proof of external world, Wright reconstructs the argument of disjunctivism as follows:

(P1). Either I am perceiving a hand in front of my face or I am in some kind of delusional state.

(P2). Here is a hand.

⁷ McDowell, John: “Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge”. In: *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality*. Cambridge. 1998, 389.

⁸ McDowell, John: *Mind and World*. Cambridge. 1996, 111-113. See also Wright, Crispin: “(Anti-)Skeptics Simple and Subtle: G. E. Moore and John McDowell”. In: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65 No.2. 2002, 340f.

Therefore,

(C). There is a material world (since any hand is a material object existing in space).

(P1) is the disjunctive conception of experience. Wright argues that, in order to provide the warrant—the good disjunct of (P1)—for (P2), which entails (C), we have to discount the bad disjunct of (P1). However, the bad disjunct could be subjectively indistinguishable from the good one so that disjunctivism still offers merely defeasible warrant. Disjunctivism is said to be entitled to discount the bad disjunct, because it implicitly accepts (C). For the bad disjunct would be true were (C) false. Therefore, the argument of disjunctivism begs the question.⁹

According to Wright, what makes the skeptic's scenario so haunting is not the highest common factor conception, but subjective indistinguishability. The disjunctive conception, rather than dislodging the force of skepticism, manifests our incapacity to distinguish perception and delusion:

That a disjunction is considered justified whenever one of its disjuncts is, is hardly remarkable. What is relevant is rather that in this case it is our practice to treat one in particular of the disjuncts as justified—[the good one]—whenever the disjunction as a whole is justified and there is, merely, *no evidence for* the other disjunct! That's a manifest fallacy unless the case is one where we have a *standing reason* to regard the lack of any salient justification for [the bad disjunct] as reason to discount it. And—the skeptical thought will be—it's hard to see what could count as such a standing reason except a prior entitlement to the belief that delusions are rare. But that's just tantamount to the belief that there is a material world which, at least on the surfaces of things, is pretty much revealed for what it is in what we take to be normal waking experience.¹⁰

Wright holds that, since the warrant from experience is defeasible, in order to refute skepticism, we need additional non-question-begging reasons to prove the existence of external world. Given that disjunctivism fails or is not intended to provide such a reason, skepticism remains intact under the disjunctive conception.

⁹ Wright: “(Anti-)Sceptics Simple and Subtle”, 342-45.

¹⁰ Wright: “(Anti-)Sceptics Simple and Subtle”, 346.

McDowell replies that Wright is correct that the whole disjunct can at best provide defeasible warrant, but he in fact miscasts the disjunction in the role in which the highest common factor conception is supposed to be casted:

The justification for a perceptual claim is an entitlement to the ‘good’ disjunct. What entitles one to that is not that one’s experience warrants the whole disjunction, plus some supposed ground for discounting the ‘bad’ disjunct. That would commit us to trying to reconstruct the epistemic standing constituted by perceiving something to be the case in terms of the highest common factor conception of experience, plus whatever ground we can think of for discounting the ‘bad’ disjunct. I think Wright is correct that that is hopeless; if we see things this way, the skeptic wins. But the disjunctive conception eliminates the apparent need for any such project, because it contradicts the highest common factor conception.¹¹

Disjunctivism differs from the highest common factor conception in the respect that perception constitutes a type of experience intrinsically different from the delusional types of experience. Wright understands this difference as a *metaphysical* thesis about the nature of experience: perception directly engages in the material world, but delusion does not.¹² But McDowell regards this metaphysical difference with *epistemological* implication that perception is an epistemically distinguished type of experience: “If one sees that P, it cannot fail to be the case that P.”¹³ For McDowell, the justification of the empirical belief that P is as we see it is *intrinsic* to the very experience that we perceive that P. But Wright thinks that we need additional evidence *extrinsic* to that experience to discount the bad disjunct. Insofar as Wright does not recognize that perception differs from delusion not only in its nature but also in its epistemic status, his disjunction is still for McDowell under the highest common factor conception, according to which in either cases of experience, we are in the

¹¹ McDowell, John: “The Disjunctive Conception of Experience as Material for a Transcendental Argument”. In: *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge*, 386.

¹² Wright: “(Anti-)Sceptics Simple and Subtle”, 341; see also his: “Comment on John McDowell’s ‘The Disjunctive Conception of Experience as Material for a Transcendental Argument’”. In: *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge*, 390f.

¹³ McDowell: “The Disjunctive Conception of Experience”, 384.

same epistemic position.

But even if Wright does not understand McDowell's disjunctivism correctly, he can still reply that McDowell does not confront with skepticism directly. For Wright, the fallibility of experience is genuine: "normal perceptual experience allows in principle of perfect phenomenological counterfeit,"¹⁴ which makes vivid the skeptic's predicament that perception and delusion are subjectively indistinguishable. If McDowell's disjunctivism that facts manifest themselves in perception does not dismiss subjective indistinguishability as fictitious, skepticism can argue that we are still blind to the manifesting facts. To escape the skeptic's predicament, we need to show that the fallibility of experience does not threaten our ability to justify empirical beliefs by evidence from experience. In other words, disjunctivism has to accommodate the phenomenological fact that our experience is fallible, but rejects the view that that fact entails subjective indistinguishability.

Now I turn to argue that Kant—in the Fourth Paralogism—supplements McDowell's disjunctivism with the requisite argument that the fallibility of experience does not entail subjective indistinguishability. In light of McDowell's disjunctivism, I will argue that the Fourth Paralogism nonetheless shows that skepticism is self-refuted in the sense that the fallibility of experience in fact denies its claim that delusion could be the perfect phenomenal counterfeit of perception. Kant thus offers the key factor that is missing or not explicitly stated in McDowell's disjunctivism.

III

In the Fourth Paralogism, the proof of skeptical idealism is formulated as follows:

¹⁴ Wright: "Comment on John McDowell's", 390.

Dasjenige, auf dessen Dasein, nur als einer Ursache zu gegebenen Wahrnehmungen, geschlossen werden kann, hat eine nur *zweifelhafte Existenz*: Nun sind alle äußere Erscheinungen von der Art: das ihr Dasein nicht unmittelbar wahrgenommen, sondern auf sie, als die Ursache gegebener Wahrnehmungen, allein geschlossen werden kann: Also ist das Dasein aller Gegenstände äußerer Sinne zweifelhaft.¹⁵

Kant accepts the first premise that our knowledge of external world will be doubtful if it is *inferential*.¹⁶ Here Kant agrees with disjunctivism that objective states of affairs must be directly available to us. The defect of the skeptic's argument, Kant diagnoses, is that the term 'outer' is ambiguous, which can be understood *empirically* and *transcendentally*: a thing outside us in the transcendental sense is a thing in itself that is unknowable to us and is the cause of outer appearances; and outer appearances—the objects outside us in the empirical sense—are what we ordinarily perceive.¹⁷ For Kant, therefore, skepticism is correct that the existence of things in themselves is doubtful since we could only infer it from our perception of outer appearances. Nonetheless, this result does not threaten our experience of outer appearances, for we perceive them as immediately as inner appearances.

However, Kant's insistence that outer appearances are immediately perceived does not secure their objectivity. For outer appearances (as well as inner ones) are the objects in us in the transcendental sense, namely "nur eine Art Vorstellungen."¹⁸ Although Kant claims that his doctrine is empirically real,¹⁹ for many readers it is merely a two-fold rejection of realism: "on the one hand, a denial that sensible objects exist outside the mind, and on the other, a denial that it is possible to rely on the existence of supersensible objects."²⁰ These readers take it as the evidence of Kant's

¹⁵ KrV, AA: A366.20-367.06.

¹⁶ KrV, AA: A368.06-12.

¹⁷ KrV, AA: A372.15-373.16.

¹⁸ KrV, AA: A370.09.

¹⁹ KrV, AA: A371.12.

²⁰ Caranti: *Kant and the Scandal of Philosophy*, 55.

implicit commitment to phenomenalism, as he acknowledges that skepticism is “ein Wohltäter der menschlichen Vernunft”²¹ and forces us to take “die einzige Zuflucht, die uns übrig bleibt, nämlich zu der Idealität aller Erscheinungen zu ergreifen.”²²

As noted above, there is a substantial amount of literature that rejects the phenomenalist interpretation of Kant’s transcendental idealism. Some scholars hold that the decision between these two readings is crucial to the interpretation of Kant’s philosophy.²³ But to choose either reading at the outset, I am afraid, will distort the nature of Kant’s argument against skepticism, making it too vulnerable or too defensive. To avoid this thorny issue, I think that it will be neutral and safe enough if the distinction between things outside us and in us both in the transcendental sense is understood as that between things cognized only inferentially and things cognized immediately. Therefore, the lesson Kant learns from skepticism—‘the ideality of all appearances’—is that only the reality of those we can immediately cognize can be ascertained.

Furthermore, for us, to decide on which reading at the outset sheds no light on the debate between skepticism and disjunctivism. For the skeptic’s argument based on the premise that our knowledge of outer objects is inferential reveals its employment of the highest common factor conception that external objects—which, for skepticism, are things outside us in the transcendental sense—do not manifest themselves directly in perception. The non-phenomenalist reading does not show any defect of the skeptic’s argument but rather simply asserts the disjunctive conception that in veridical perceptions we immediately perceive outer objects. Indeed, Kant apparently replies skepticism by simply replacing the highest common factor conception with the

²¹ KrV, AA: A377.23f.

²² KrV, AA: A378.24-26.

²³ For a detailed discussion about these two readings of Kant’s philosophy, see Ameriks, Karl: “Kantian Idealism Today”. In: *History of Philosophical Quarterly* 9. 1992, 329-42.

disjunctive conception. According to Kant, outer objects are outer appearances, and the existence of appearances is not doubtful for it can be proved by the immediate awareness of our consciousness.²⁴ But this reply, as Wright argues, cannot escape the skeptic's threat that perception and delusion can be subjectively undifferentiated. Therefore, we should not presuppose the non-phenomenalist reading, but rather find how the disjunctive conception can be immune from the threat Wright presents.

Kant's argument against skepticism does not take the disjunctive conception merely as a metaphysical thesis, as Wright understands, that outer objects are directly manifested in perception, but rather McDowell's epistemological disjunctivism that the criterion of empirical reality is intrinsic to the experience itself. Since only the reality of those we can immediately perceive is available to us, the criterion of empirical reality cannot be the correspondence of experience with things in themselves; in other words, the criterion should lie within us in the transcendental sense: "*Was mit einer Wahrnehmung nach empirischen Gesetzen zusammenhängt, ist wirklich*".²⁵ The empirical laws, according to Kant's transcendental idealism, are the *a priori* conditions of the transcendental subjectivity. Therefore, the falsity of skepticism is to take the correspondence with things in themselves as the ground of empirical reality. Were the criterion of empirical reality extrinsic to experience, skepticism would be irrefutable.

However, this reply does not offer us what is missing in McDowell's disjunctivism, namely, how disjunctivism can get out of the skeptic's predicament that perception and delusion are subjectively indistinguishable. For skepticism would not deny the coherence and lawfulness of experience and even agree that we can

²⁴ KrV, AA: A370.14-371.03.

²⁵ KrV, AA: A376.17-19.

distinguish veridical perceptions from ordinary hallucinations. All skepticism needs is that, given the fallibility of perception, delusions can be in principle subjectively indistinguishable from veridical perceptions. Our experience could be systematically deceptive in such a way that, even though we think we could tell the difference between reality and appearance, our experience could be a mere play of mental representations.²⁶

To refute skepticism, the disjunctive conception has to show that skepticism cannot infer from the premise that we sometimes suffer hallucinations to the conclusion that our experience is a grand hallucination. The thrust of Kant's argument is, nonetheless, that in the skeptic's argument the term 'hallucination' is as ambiguous as the term "outer." The skeptic's argument is unsound since it jumps from empirical hallucinations to transcendent ones. The premise that we suffer hallucinations shows that we do distinguish veridical perceptions from ordinary hallucinations. This premise is true only if the criterion of empirical reality is within us in the transcendental sense. For if the criterion is outside us in the transcendental sense, there is nothing intrinsic to the experience itself that we can find ourselves in delusion. The lawfulness and coherence of experience, as Kant argues, offers the background against which ordinary hallucinations are distinguished. Accordingly, the term 'hallucination' in the skeptic's premise refers to an empirical one.

Our suffering of hallucinations can be so vivid that we are tempted to accept the skeptic's conclusion that hallucination can be perfectly indistinguishable from perception. But however abnormal ordinary hallucinations are, since we can distinguish them by the characteristic intrinsic to the experience, they are still part of

²⁶ For the skeptical response to Kant's argument along this line, see Beiser: *German Idealism*, 66-69; Caranti: *Kant and the Scandal of Philosophy*, 97-99.

empirical reality. The skeptic's conclusion that our whole experience is a grand hallucination would be true only if the criterion of its reality lay outside us in the transcendental sense. For the criterion outside us requires evidence extrinsic to the experience, which is beyond our cognitive capacity. Hence the term 'hallucination' in the skeptic's conclusion is understood transcendently, but in its premise empirically. Again, the fault of the skeptic's argument, as Kant has already indicated, is due to confusion.

In light of McDowell's disjunctivism, I argue that Kant shows that the threat of skepticism from the fallibility of experience is not genuine. Skepticism employs the highest common factor conception that the warrant for empirical beliefs must be extrinsic to experience itself as the cause of the fallibility of experience. But the fact that our experience is fallible, from which skepticism is drawn, presupposes the disjunctive conception that the warrant is intrinsic to experience itself. Kant supplements McDowell's disjunctivism by showing that skepticism is at bottom committed to the disjunctive conception, and that the highest common factor conception is dismissed as apocryphal. Moreover, it is also shown that we do not need to presuppose the non-phenomenalist reading to interpret Kant's philosophy, but still can prove it to be the potential consequence of transcendental idealism.